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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: U/SYG PASCOE REPORTS ISAIAS AND MELES
OPEN TO WORKING LEVEL BORDER TALKS

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER TED HARKEMA. REASON: 1.4 (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Under Secretary General for Political Affairs Lynn B. Pascoe, accompanied by Acting Special Representative of the Secretary General for the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) Ambassador Azouz Ennifar, informed Ambassador and poloffs on August 29 that both Eritrean President Isaias and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles expressed willingness to engage in working level border talks in separate Aug. 28 and 29 meetings. Isaias was ambivalent on the EEBC decision to demarcate the border by coordinates in November, but he expressed support for the continued presence of UNMEE in Eritrea. Isaias also supported the notion of an open border after final demarcation and normalization between the two countries. Nevertheless, Pascoe warned the Ambassador that Ethiopia's continued opposition to the November demarcation could lead them into a dangerous position that would threaten renewed conflict. END SUMMARY.

ISAIAS AND MELES OPEN TO WORKING LEVEL TALKS

¶2. (C) On August 29 Under Secretary General for Political Affairs Lynn B. Pascoe briefed Ambassador and poloffs on his August 28 meeting with Eritrean President Isaias in Asmara and briefly discussed his meeting with Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles earlier that morning.

¶3. (C) Both Meles and Isaias reacted favorably to Pascoe's inquiry whether they would be open to working level border talks with each other. Isaias replied that talks would not be a problem and suggested that Yemane Gebreab represent Eritrea. Pascoe declined to discuss his conversation with Meles in detail, but revealed that Meles expressed that talks were possible. Pascoe, who was considering hosting the event, said he would pursue the possibility of talks with Yemane first, and if he received a favorable response, he would then approach Ethiopian Deputy Foreign Minister Tekeda. Meles also suggested Ethiopia's Ambassador in Brussels, Berhane Gebrechristol, former Ambassador to the US and founding member of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Meles admitted "no one really cares about Badme, rather it was a symbol of how you prove you are in the right."

¶4. (C) On the border Pascoe stated that Isaias was ambivalent toward the decision by the Eritrea Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) to finalize the border demarcation in November. On the one hand, Isaias welcomed the finality of the border decision, but was concerned that if the EEBC was dissolved afterward there would be no mechanism to ensure the decision was implemented. Ennifar added that Eritrea would welcome the dismissal of the EEBC commissioners, but not the commission itself.

¶5. (C) Isaias appeared favorable towards the continued presence of UNMEE, recognizing the need for UNMEE to assist with border demarcation, according to Pascoe. Ennifar was unsure whether this meant Asmara would lift the helicopter ban, but Pascoe said surveyors would be allowed into Eritrea to demarcate on the ground and opined that Isaias would allow UNMEE to operate as it needed to support demarcation.

BORDER SHOULD BE OPEN AFTER DEMARCATION

¶6. (C) When asked about the problem of divided villages, Isaias replied that it was a non-issue. He declared once relations were normalized the border should open to allow the free movement of people. Pascoe relayed that Isaias was against simultaneous talks with Ethiopia concerning the border and normalization of relations and insisted the border must come first, but Isaias thought normalization would not be an issue once the border had been finally demarcated.

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ETHIOPIAN OPPOSITION TO NOVEMBER DEMARCATION DANGEROUS

¶7. (C) Pascoe warned Ethiopia's continued insistence that the November demarcation not take place could back them into a corner, force them to take drastic action, "and walk this off the cliff." He said Tekeda is going to New York to warn the international community the EEBC's actions will lead to war, but noted that the sentiment in New York overwhelmingly views Ethiopia as the greater impediment to a final resolution of the border impasse due to its refusal to take action to demonstrate its professed acceptance of the final and binding boundary delimitation decision. Because of this concern, Pascoe urged the United States to make every effort to dissuade Meles from taking such a hard stance on the November demarcation.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: The possibility of working level talks between Eritrea and Ethiopia represents a tiny ray of hope that any approaching cliffs can be avoided. The history of the two countries relationship over the last decade suggests moving to direct talks will be exceedingly difficult and would almost certainly have to take place out of public view.

Isaias' warm welcome to the Under Secretary General and apparent favorable view of UNMEE, a change from his recent posture, may indicate he is prepared to accept UNMEE's continued presence in Eritrea for now. Ethiopia's August 15 order to expel six of Norway's nine diplomats in Ethiopia, however, suggests that Washington may have to review its strategy in how best to harness international partners to press the parties to remain engaged in addressing this issue.

END COMMENT.

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